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REMINISCENCES OF

ERIE CANAL SURVEYS

IN 1816-1817

By WILLIAM C. YOUNG

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WILLIAM C. YOUNG.

FROM A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN ABOUT 1866, IN THE POSSESSION OF THE BUFFALO HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

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REMINISCENCES OF
SURVEYS OF THE ERIE CANAL
IN 1816-1817

By WILLIAM C. YOUNG[1]

In 1816 the first surveys were made on which to base plans and estimates for the Erie Canal. My recollections of incidents in connection with those surveys are the subject of this paper, being then a rodman of two of the engineering and surveying parties.

We surveyed the portion called the Middle Division from Rome, westerly to Seneca river, and that portion of the Eastern Division, from Rome to Schoharie creek, in all 154 miles. The remaining portion of the Eastern Division to Albany was not surveyed that year. The Western Division from Seneca river to Buffalo was assigned to Judge James Geddes, of much note as a surveyor, explorer and engineer.

The report of the surveys was required at an early period of the legislative session of 1817, which limited the

1. Read at a meeting of the Buffalo Historical Society, at the author's residence, Jan. 15, 1866. Now first published from the original manuscript. Its value is by no means lessened because of the quaintness of the style. Though the poetical effusion with which Mr. Young concluded his reminiscences may not be canal history, it happily recalls the early gatherings of the Historical Society, when friends and neighbors met in informal mood. The "club meetings" of those early years offered other than intellectual refresnment; yet the papers prepared for these meetings include some of the most valuable contributions that have been made to our local annals.

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field work to make timely arrangements for the maps, estimates and reports.

My residence at that time was in Whitesboro, Oneida County, a village between Utica and Rome.

Jonas Platt and Thomas R. Gould, lawyers and statesmen, resided there. Benjamin Wright, land surveyor, civil engineer and statesman, resided at Rome. These men were most prominent actors as legislators in incipient measures for the canal. As previously concerted between them, in 1818 Judge Wright seconded the motion of Judge Forman for partial explorations of the country west of Seneca river for an interior line for a canal, so called in contra-distinction to the canal route through Lake Ontario, Oswego river and Oneida lake, commonly accepted as the only feasible one for a water communication with Lake Erie. Thomas R. Gould, as chairman of the committee to which the resolution was referred, reported the joint resolution which was passed, and under it the survey was made.

In 1810 Judge Platt, a State senator and leader of the Federal minority of the Senate, influenced measures for engaging DeWitt Clinton, the leader of the Republican majority, to second the important legislative steps for the canal, he having declined to lead and make the motion, but seconded it and refrained from a speech on the question, thus freeing it from party influence. Mr. Clinton took an active part as a commissioner under this first measure, made the report and introduced the bill for further progress, and became a leader and champion of the Erie canal policy; and subsequently when the Federal party had the ascendency in the then council of appointment, Judge Platt, as one of them, proposed Mr. Clinton as Mayor of New York City, and appointed him.

Such were the men of my locality; respected, honest and obeyed, and to follow them as leaders was the desire of him who directed my footsteps and procured for me occupation in the surveying and engineering parties of 1816 and 1817. Thomas R. Gould was a member of Congress in 1817 and 1818, and procured for me a cadetship at West Point, and this ended my connection with the Erie canal.

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until after its whole completion and since, but collaterally in connection with making and operating the railroad alongside. Other men of Oneida county will be named in this paper who were my seniors in years and knowledge; and yet another class, after those first noted, such as Canvass White, Nathan T. Roberts and John B. Jervis, who have names and fame as projectors and makers of works of the Erie canal, infinitely beyond the reach of the influence of my weak and humble pen pretensions.

Judge Wright organized his engineering and surveying party at Rome in June, 1816, and established stations and bench levels from which to commence his survey, and proceeded westerly.

Mr. Broadhead subsequently organized his party, and from the same station and level benches proceeded easterly for a connected survey. He had proceeded with the survey to Herkimer, 31 miles of his portion to be surveyed, when Mr. Wright completed the 77 miles assigned to him. The method of the survey was as follows—and homely and unartistically described as it may be, yet the detail of small events is incident to the theme of this paper.

The party consisted of 13 persons, to rank and station thus: A chief engineer, a surveyor, an assistant engineer, two rodmen, two chainmen, three axemen, a packman, a cook and a teamster.

The surveyor, with an eye to engineering skill, would take a course over ground of probable water level, then covered with large trees and small woods of hemlock, cedar, alder bushes and weeds, and sight an object (without flagmen), and note its compass bearing. Then, with compass and one arm, and staff in hand of other, would lead the way through swamp and swale, still eyeing the object ahead until reached.

One axeman closely followed him, chopping bark from adjacent trees near the line. Two other axemen then cleared a pathway about four feet wide of bushes, weeds and all obstacles to level sighting. The chainmen then followed and established station stakes at four chain distances driven by one of them. At the foot of each stake a peg

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would be driven level to the surface of the ground, or on hard earth the heels of the rodmen's boots would make a solid standpoint for the rod to rest upon, that no variation in the base would take place between the forward and back sighting; also that in returning it would be a standard for new operations. Bench marks more permanent were the usual standards for level references of succeeding and repeating surveys.

A prominent root of a tree just under a broad hewn surface would be found by hewing, to rest the rod upon, and its level marked on this surface for all succeeding ones.

The assistant engineer then placed the leveling instrument intermediate to stations and nearly equidistant therefrom, and screwed it to a level. The chief engineer then sighted on the graduated poles of the rodmen; the one in the rear first and then the one in front, and from their reading would determine the rising or falling grounds and the variations from a water level by subtracting and additions, requiring judgment to determine which of these to perform. The surveyor would note the distance at which water courses and farm lines would be crossed; the kinds of timber passed through, and of the soil, whether sand, clay, loam, gravel, rock, stone, swamp and swale, and sketch surrounding objects as outlines for mapping purposes and estimates of costs.

The engineer would note the level of water beds in inference to the water line, and other changes of general surface intermediate to stations; and when openings of bush and woodland enabled, would sight far away from the line, to determine the general slopes of the surrounding surface.

When at successive stations there resulted an evident ascending or descending surface, from the standard level, the surveyor would be hailed and retrograde steps taken to a station of suitable level and a course pursued as experimental as before, thus feeling the way for a water level. Ridges and points of land would carry the line of survey far to the north of the general course and the valleys of water courses, as far again to the south, to keep the water

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level. In the final location of the canal these ridges were cut through and valleys filled up.

Oneida lake, bordering the field of survey miles away on the north, indicated the practicability of a long water level which was the engineering principle of the survey, following its table lands until its borders were passed and the waters of Onondaga, Skaneateles and Owasco lakes changed the water level standard to suitable lock lifts and depressions according as feeders and supply of water for intermediate levels could be found.

The packman brought up the rear with dinner sack on his back, and water can at his side, to replenish which he would seek for fresh running streams—a rivulet, a brook or gushing spring. And yet the pools of stagnant water were often drank from by the laboring men of the party, violently exercising in the foul, moist air of a dense forest in July and August heat, though so shaded from the sun.

A teamster, a cook, a two-horse covered wagon, stored with camp equipage and provisions, was the nucleus of the party. Its appendages were: A dog, a gun, two tin horns, camp kettles and frying pans; and for table and furniture, a fallen tree, or a log, a hillock, a fresh-hewn chip for the plate, a pointed or forked stick for roasting-spit; and a pocket jack-knife carried by each one of the party. Hard bread and salt pork constituted the standard bill of table fare, though fresh fish and small game, taken in exchange for pork with Indians of Oneida, occasionally gave savory odors from camp fires.

The line of survey was in the general direction of the highway and turnpike from Rome and Utica westerly through Verona, Vernon, Oneida, Chittenango and Syracuse. Lateral roads to this crossed the line of survey leading to and around Oneida lake. By these crossroads the teamster and cook were taught to judge of proper localities for camping grounds to interrupt the line of survey, and changed as directed by the chief engineer once or twice or perhaps three times a week. Dry ground, fresh

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water and hemlock boughs were requisites for camping grounds.

Two tents and a portion of the baggage wagon well spread with foliage of the hemlock, odorous and fresh, upon which to spread blankets, afforded shelter and shade for sleep and rest: and waking dreams of the great work undertaken. The tin horn appended to the baggage wagon and one carried by the packman guided our steps to such resting places when in advance of the survey; our steps would be retrograde to the camp more commonly than ahead, for nightly rest and shelter.

Occasionally cleared fields and beginnings of cultivated farms would be crossed; also lands chopped, logged and underbrushed, abandoned to the rattlesnake, by whose rattle our steps were arrested, a death blow given the reptile and his tail rattle taken as a trophy and curiosity.

Windfalls, acres wide and long, were in our way, with trunks of large trees prostrate and roots turned up, entangled and entwined, root with branch, and so filled in with second growth of bush and brier and noxious weeds as to be most formidable obstacles to get through with line and level.

The line of survey passed some two miles south of Saliner [Salina] (Salt Point), so called. The novices of the party went in a body to see the salt-boiling process.

At the crossing of the outlet of Skaneateles lake, called the Jordan river, a well cultivated farm bordered its banks; these green fields and still waters inspired longings for relief from the weary toils of swamp and thicket. The mosquitos swarmed about our faces and hands. The latter being fixed upon instruments requiring a steady purpose gave no weapon of defense to crush or brush off the blood-sucking insect. Moss and bark, dry leaves and twigs, were stuffed into cylinders of oyster-keg size, of birch bark, and strung on shoulders, ignited to a smoking state, as some relief. A large tree was noted near our path, into the hollow of which all of our party entered through a small hole, cut in one of its sides, and stood elbow to elbow, facing inward, with backs against its inner side of shell, and still

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there was room for more. It was a buttonwood, and bulging from the root, but shoulder high, assumed its body shape and size.

A country woman, observer of our ways, expressed joy at the prospect of soft Lake Erie water for washing-days. She probably had read the report of 1811 by the commissioner, who supposed the waters of Lake Erie would flow to Albany and then by locks, or railway planes, boats were to be let down into the Hudson river.

The Seneca river was reached near and above Montezeumer [Montezuma], its water level noted as a connecting reference to any survey still westerly, and thus the field work of the survey of the Middle Division terminated.

The party returned to Rome, some by baggage wagon, others by stage, and were discharged. The chief engineer and the surveyor made the maps, profiles and estimates as a report to the canal commissioners, who in course reported to the Legislature at the session of 1817, in the proceedings of which it may now be found.

The present writer joined the surveying party descending the Mohawk river and its encampment opposite Herkimer village in the capacity of rodman, as before. Its manner of proceeding differed somewhat from that of the Middle Division.

The cleared fields required a flagman for the surveyor and chainman by which to shape their courses. The descending grounds required lifts or depressions to be made and intermediate water levels pursued with a view to saving cost in construction, with constant care for river flood on one side and hill torrents on the other.

Engineering skill was more exercised on this than on the Middle Division. The surveyor of this party, who led the way, learned by practice to take an early stand as most practical in canal making. The long level west of Rome induced its extension easterly, perhaps under undue influence of Utica men.

The baggage wagon, cook and tents were necessary, as almost every house on both sides of the river, although a tavern, was nightly filled with travellers, teamsters, drivers,

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etc. Oat straw was the substitute for bedding, in place of the odorous and fresh twigs of the hemlock, of the more western survey.

A Yankee asked a Dutchman how his horses were made and kept so fat and sleek, and was informed that they were fed on oat straw but not half threshed. "Mien horse and mien self" was as quaint a saying with the then Mohawk Dutchman as is with us of more modern tastes and pretended refinement, "Strike my dog and you strike me."

Our bills of fare were as in the common walks of life: coffee, tea, bread, meats, vegetables, fruits, fresh milk and butter, products of rich alluvial Mohawk flats, arable hillsides and plains, beyond, then unsurpassed in fertility and productiveness, and with a class of people as epicurean in *cuisine* arts of English aristocracy as Sir William Johnson's family could disseminate.

About the time of which I write, it was the custom of Mohawk valley men to fit out trains of teams for the West of—

Chestnut, bays,
Sorrel, grays,
Black & roan,
Shimmering under the curry-comb.
With wagon-loads of
Fruits and berries
Jams and cherries
Luscious, for the Genesee flattes,
And loaded back
With wheat and grains
For the Mohawk plains
And for the Albany market.

In 1815 a "Young" man (the present writer) was clerk for Juba Storrs & Co. at Williamsville, Erie county. Benjamin Caryl, deceased, a principal of the firm, was his uncle, and Gen. Storrs (now present) another principal and since a cousin by marriage.

A period of ague and fever was endured till the fall season, when teams of such wagons as described were passing Williamsville easterly bound. A passage was taken and a seat resting upon the sideboards of the wagon base

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rode upon to a home near Utica, a distance of about two hundred miles.

This line of survey was near to and crossing the highway which enabled the baggage wagon and cook to be at hand, at all times wanted, and the packman's services unnecessary. The September and October season was convenient for this survey. The meadows and grain fields were not injured by the tread of many persons. The mellow fields of the Mohawk flats were fresh sown with wheat, and its sprouting herbage was rich in view to the passing stranger. The butternut and shag-barked walnut afforded good pickings during leisure moments of the survey.

High-toned families lived on rich, alluvial flats with habits which were relics of Sir William, Sir John and Col. Guy Johnson's Mohawk aristocracy. There were many negro slaves in the valley: colored men were the more common laborers in the field.

A class of people of dark butternut complexion was common, called the black Dutch, companionable with the negro and apparently with his swine.

The passage of the gorge of the Mohawk valley at Little Falls was far more beautiful than at present. The side hill cliffs and precipices were covered with evergreen foliage of the pine, hemlock and cedar, which the axe and fires of canal and railroad innovations have made bare. Pockets in the rocks were great curiosities; they were quite regular in shape, some two or three feet in diameter and several feet deep. In one projecting cliff one of these pockets is open from top to a suspended base some twelve or fifteen feet through. In emerging from this narrow cragged and towering hill-pass are expanded Mohawk flats and gently rolling, sloping, arable lands, a pleasant view.

Just there, on the south side of the valley, General Herkimer's house and farm were prominent. He of Revolutionary fame fell in the battle of Oriskany. It was a large brick, gambrel-roofed house in a sightly location, but odd in more modern architectural rules. It is still to be seen from the railroad trains in passing.

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In it there lived at the time of passing on this survey a family of some note and bearing, acquaintances of our chief engineer. He entertained them in sighting through the telescope of the leveling instrument, which reversed all objects looked at. Apparently, persons would be seen standing on their heads, heads of animals with feet in the air, trees standing on their boughs. This magic effect preceded the surveying party in notoriety, and brought crowds of visitors to our camp and field operations to see the curiosity. This annoyed our chief engineer beyond all description, who was cross and crabbed, petulant and uncongenial, but with his set associates, Utica exclusives.

Near and below Canajoharie there stood an antique building with end to the road and circular-roofed, with rear half burrowed in the hillside, and still within and under these might have been recesses in the rocks, caves, dens of safety, or evil contrivings. It was Kane's store in earlier times, a trading place of branches of a family of some pretension on the lower Mohawk and Hudson river valleys. A Yankee pedlar was brought before a Dutch magistrate at Canajoharie for violating the Sunday laws (so-called) prohibiting travelling on Sundays excepting with a magistrate's pass. With proper appliances the matter was settled and a pass procured which the Yankee was required to write and sign for the magistrate, the latter making the usual cross between the Christian name and surname. At length Kane's settlement day with his neighbors came and a bill for goods with order appended was presented to the magistrate, when he exclaimed: "Mein Gott, dat dam't Yankee pass!"

At the nose of the valley, so called, the river turns easterly and crosses directly through expanded flat lands to the mouth of Schoharie creek, passing Caughnewaga, the river depot for Johnstown, Sir William Johnson's home mansion and farm; he died in 1774. Sir John, a son, and Col. Guy Johnson, a son-in-law, succeeded to estates and Tory rule as well as to the confidence of Joseph Brant, an Indian chief—Thayendanegea, a (much questioned) warrior friend—

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In whom there coursed the kindred tie
Of Sir William, Sir John and Col. Guy.
Thayendanegea's carnaged hand
Is powerless now, all o'er the land.
While threshold, bannister and door
Bear marks of blood as with the floor.
Where savage warfare, tory strife
Made havoc with the scalping-knife.
From Caughnewaga's mighty scare
Peace and quiet now reign there.
At John's hall, Sir William's reign
Was wide beyond the Mohawk plain
Where Thayendanegea's savage band
Knew no bounds within the land:
But raging like the Mohawk flood
Thro' work and defiles of the wood,
Of low-land, highland, crevice, glen
The haunts of wild cats, fiends of men!
Like raging fires that burn within
The very courts of Hell and Sin,
Till satiate with blood and strife
They strung the scalps and sheathed the knife.
Still rushes on the Mohawk tide
Regardless of the world beside,
Washing, bleaching, purging stains
Of bloody carnage from its plains
Till flesh and blood and whitened bone
Are mingled with the earthly loam.
Thus let the memories of the past
Be tales for peaceful homes at last.
And when the old folks join the "Young"
In plays of frolic and of fun,
They'll share the lot as seen by day,
Vicissitudes of foolish play
Which patiently they must endure
Till learned with equals to mature
Their plans for pastimes and for health
Whose years are sweetened with the wealth,
The honor, fear and love of God
With life to answer to His word.

Mr. Broadhead's party terminated its field operations at Schoharie creek, returned to Utica and were severally dis-

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charged excepting the chief engineer and surveyor, who made returns of maps and estimates to the Canal Commissioners.

Practical civil engineers were not classed excepting with the land surveyors and artizan.

Locks and dams had been built under advisement of transient men of foreign practice as engineers to make navigation of the Mohawk river and Wood creek a passageway for boats of light burden.

Turnpike roads with birdseye culverts, and beds of pounded stone, under promptings of McAdam readings, were made, requiring the skill and art of civil engineers.

The prominent land surveyors of the district of country bordering the proposed line of canal were appointed engineers of the work and artizans of skill their assistants, who learned to plan with the progress of the work; and right well and at small costs were the first structures of the Erie Canal made.

A candidate under examination for a certificate to teach school, showing no knowledge of the studies usually pursued, was asked how he expected to teach that which he didn't know, and replied, "I guess I can learn as fast as the boys." Judge Benjamin Wright became the chief engineer of the Erie Canal. His social and political position was in a high place at the outset of this work. He became a distinguished consulting engineer, as works of internal improvement became a prominent field for enterprise all over the United States and Canada. He was coöperative in his counsels and ways in general. His wisdom required no cloak of exclusiveness. Mr. C. C. Broadhead took no prominent and lasting stand as a civil engineer.

Mr. Nathan S. Roberts was the surveyor of Judge Wright's party of engineers. He was a resident of Whitesboro (near Utica), taught school, where all made "manners" on entering or leaving schoolroom at session hours, surveyed land and superintended cotton factories. He punished severely with the ferule and rewarded with pictures of birds and animals, drawn and painted to please the youthful eye. His plottings and maps of land surveys

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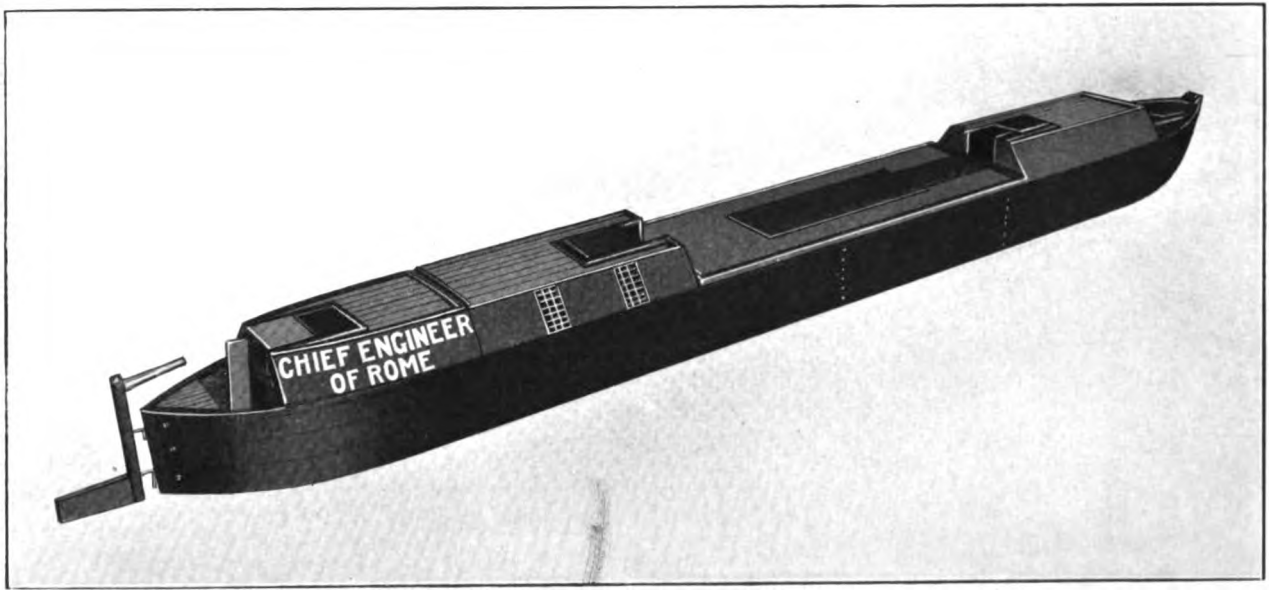

MODEL OF THE "CHIEF ENGINEER OF ROME."

THE FIRST BOAT BUILT FOR THE ERIE CANAL, BY WHICH THE TRIAL TRIP WAS MADE, UTICA TO ROME, OCTOBER 23, 1819. THIS MODEL, BROUGHT FROM ENGLAND IN 1817, WAS PRESENTED TO THE BUFFALO HISTORICAL SOCIETY BY WM. C. YOUNG, 1867.

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were accurate, plainly and neatly drawn and written. He seemed qualified for any general business.

Before the connection on this survey we associated in common school, in a special course of geometry, and in an office of a cotton factory assorting yarn hank by hank, by scales when other duties allowed. He was then a middle-aged man, stout built, quick spoken and cheerful. He married a cousin (not of his), and during a lifetime of his professional wanderings they made a family and estate worthy of note. A homestead farm just west of Canastota, in Madison county, and on the line of the canal, of his laying out, was his resting-place after years of civil engineering service in this and other states.

Canvass White, a kinsman (cousin), was the surveyor of Mr. Broadhead's party of the Eastern Division. He went to England soon after the termination of the survey of 1816 and returned in season for field operations the next year, with instruments for laying out canals, with plans and models of a canal boat, and mind stored with observations upon the canal work of England.

He assumed the position as the most practical man in canal making, and with Judge Wright coöperative in superintending the making of much of the Erie Canal, and after years of professional practice was associated in counsels of important works of internal improvement in other states.

Mr. White discovered a cement of a rock in Madison county and its better qualities over quick-lime for the masonry of the canal, and introduced its use, a vital principle, to the stability, endurance and economy of the work. He founded the water power of the Cohoes Falls Company, whose lingering growth resulted in no benefit to him. He contracted extensively for the delivery of stone at Government works in the Delaware river, procured from the Palisades of the Hudson, and became pecuniarily embarrassed in its operations. He was small in stature, of delicate constitution, consumptively inclined, and died after years of usefulness, having been kind, quiet and considerate in all his ways.

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Another name I would here record, though not connected with the surveys of 1816, but just thereafter, stepped from the walks of ordinary life into the works of the Erie Canal, became a distinguished civil engineer of importance and many works of the states, and is now the chief engineer of one of the great lines of said road, between the East and the West. John B. Jervis has a name, fame and manhood complete.

James Geddes was a distinguished surveyor and explorer for the Erie Canal, and was much more prominent in the service of the Surveyor-General of the State, who directed all explorations and surveys for the canal previous to 1816. He was the engineer of the survey of the Western Division in 1816 and 1817, and partially laid out the line between Rome and Utica for construction about the same time. One personal interview is my only recollection of him. He located the Champlain Canal, and had the reputation of having made it crooked to avoid the accumulation of water and its waves by which the banks would be washed. The force of each wave was to be broken against a curved bank of the canal.

Some practical expenses in superintending and laying out works of that canal gave the present writer a knowledge of the facts of its unnecessary curvatures; whether so designed for that purpose is uncertain. He did not take the stand of Wright, White, Roberts and Jervis as a practical engineer.

Mr. William Peacock, by direction of Mr. Ellicott, surveyed a line from the Niagara river easterly north of Mr. Geddes' survey, which latter was that of the present canal along Tonawanda creek and to Lockport. This book of maps, these plottings of surveys made in 1816 and 1817, is passed to the keeping of the Buffalo Historical Society.[1] It has undergone the vicissitudes of common life. The auction mart has been its portion and seclusions of the gar-

1. The book referred to, now in the library of the Buffalo Historical Society, is an atlas entitled: "Plottings of Surveys for the Erie Canal in 1816 and 1817." It contains sixteen beautifully executed original maps of sections of the Canal survey.

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ret a resting place among the put-away and past-useful things of an ordinary lifetime; still treasured as an heir-loom of early memories. Its torn and tattered cover, stitched and pasted, cobwebbed, dusty, mouldy, mildewed, motheaten, and yet preserved: seared like the autumn leaf, its folds are yellow with age. Still it will outlast the flesh and blood of its worldly makers, one of whose spirits has been cheered by the companionship now to part forever.

Vale of the Mohawk, visions of the past,
Haunt of my dreams enduring to the last.

. . . .

Gentlemen—Your enduring patience during this reading is acknowledged.

A double portion, seems my lot,
To sate the soul and fill the heart,
And if I've failed in history's page,
To make a mark, so much the rage,
The bill of fare as fixed by roll
Must fill the void, complete in whole,
With coffee, cold meats, sandwiches brown,
Bread, biscuit, butter and deer lamb,[1]
Cider, apples, pickles and tongue,
Enough for all, both old and Young,
To which, adjourn, sans souci, all,
To banquet room, just o'er the hall.

1. The spelling suggests that the author meant venison.

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To which, adjourn, sans souci, all,
To banquet room, just o'er the hall.

1. The spelling suggests that the author meant venison.

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